

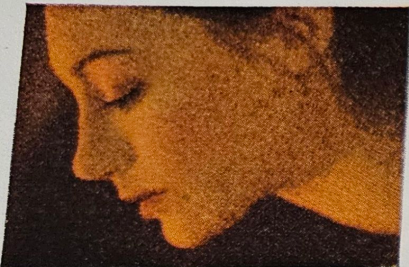
PLAYBOY®

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fiction By
Melvin Van Peebles
THE TRUE AMERICAN

not only is there life after death but there is sex, music and soul food, too—a diabolically funny look at a modern inferno by the writer, director and star of “sweet sweetback’s baadasssss song”

ONCE UPON A TIME, long, long ago, but not so far away, George Abraham Carver was born in a place called Georgia. The first time he lived, he didn’t travel more than 150 miles from the shack in which he was born. For one thing, he was a marked child. In fact, for one, two and—some militants and maybe some sociologists would say—three things, he was a marked child: He was black.

When he was 15, his parents died. A couple of years later, some bad men sold him some bad moonshine and he got into a fight with the Negro doctor’s son at the dance for colored folks.

*“Wave the ocean
Wave the sand
Wave the good times
And wave again....”*

Primitive soul music flowed from the dance. It drifted out into the middle of the dirt road and joined up with the succulent night odor of honeysuckle and floated up the hill on a breeze.

The sheriff sat in his wagon up on the ridge bobbing his head to the music and watching the lamplight gently flickering from the barn. In his mind, he was inside among the ocean of smiling black faces, watching the beads of sweat rolling down the singer’s face and feeling the shock of stomping feet. Actually, inside, the refreshment table had just been

bumped, the best cake sat on and the collard-green juice spilled into the chicken platter.

Suddenly, two silhouettes hurtled through the doorway and rolled in the dust.

"Trouble," the deputy said, and spat into the blue-black night.

"Yep," said the sheriff, "giddyup." The battlers were gathered up, thrown into the wagon and dragged to jail for disturbing the peace.

"Listen, you boys," the sheriff said, giving his deputies a wink. "I don't mind you bucks fighting, but I'm responsible for keeping law and order in this town and, you know yourself, it wouldn't look right if I let you two niggers go busting up your folks' Saturday-night dance over some high-yaller hussy, now, would it?"

Abe and the doctor's son had cooled down and regained their senses in the face of the common enemy. They shook their heads and flashed their teeth stupidly, as they were supposed to do. The deputies smiled at each other and chuckled at the childish coons, but the sheriff, who was a bloodthirsty son of a bitch, wasn't satisfied.

"Look, you boys, we ain't about to spoil your fun. . . . I gotta coupla knives here we took off two prisoners we sent over to the chain gang at Eastonville and I'm gonna let you boys borrow them . . . go ahead, take them." The sheriff handed the long and ugly-looking knives through the cell bars. The boys didn't want to take them.

"Go ahead, niggers, go ahead, niggers, take them and whichever of you boys wins . . . why, he . . . he can go free and I'll forget the whole thing."

The boys gulped and shook their heads.

"Beats the chain gang at Eastonville, don't it?" the sheriff said. "Take 'em!" he ordered.

The boys took the knives. They began to circle, giving each other a wide berth.

The three officers of the law clanged their billy clubs on the bars and clamored for action: "Go to it! Go to it!"

"Sheriff Benson, sir . . ." a voice two fifths dignified and three fifths servile called.

The sheriff whirled around. A small black man wearing glasses and holding his hat in his hand was standing under the naked bulb at the other end of the cruddy hallway.

"Well, Uncle Dan!" the sheriff said, bursting into a big puppy-dog grin of recognition. "Still getting the mayor's high yallars out of trouble?"

Dr. Dan had a great deal of influence in the town, for a colored man, anyway, due to the fact that he aborted the mulatto girlfriends of the laying white citizens when the need arose.

"Sheriff, sir . . . that's my son . . . my only son, sir . . ." Dr. Dan moved forward as he talked, nervously fingering the trim of his frayed old hat. "Sir,

please . . . I'd like to please take Ronald home?"

The grin never left the sheriff's big beefy face. He figured, what the hell, Uncle Dan was a good ole boy.

"Sho, Uncle, but you watch him, you hear?" The sheriff opened the cell and the doctor and his son disappeared down the hall. When Abe tried the same thing, the sheriff shoved him back behind bars.

"Your ass is grass, boy!" he snarled.

They kept Abe in jail for a week, then got him sentenced to five months on the chain gang at Eastonville.

Before his five months was up, there was a prison break and Abe found himself hobbling through the swamps shackled to a big bulletheaded, badly scarred-up Negro called Dogface who threatened to kill him if he didn't move faster.

It happened this way: It had been even hotter than the hinges of hell that day. The trusty, who had been at the dipper in the water bucket three times in the past hour, wanted to pee. He looked out over the cotton field, checking the white-and-black zebra-striped backs of the convicts, shackled two by two, bent over endless snowy rows. It seemed OK. He dismounted his horse with a sigh.

Abe saw the trusty answering nature's call. He decided to take the opportunity to give himself a little break. He straightened up and wiped his brow. Suddenly, he was jerked off his feet. He thumped his head in the clay and the world started spinning.

Abe came to being dragged through the weeds by the shackle on his ankle. He looked up ahead over his big toe. His huge partner was crawling along, towing him.

"Dogface . . . what you doing?"

His mate stopped and turned. His appearance was incredible. Every inch of naked skin protruding from his prison rags had a scar. Even his lips, which he had just put his finger to for silence, had been chewed in two or three places.

"Sssshh . . . I'm escaping, fool. What's it look like I'm doing?" Dogface hissed.

"But how about me?" Abe protested. "I'll be free soon."

A train whistled in the distance.

"Hear that?" Dogface whispered.

"That'll be the milk train. We gonna catch it, just like I planned."

"But I only got a week to go."

Dogface grabbed Abe by the throat and began to squeeze. "Listen, young nigger, if you don't haul ass out of here with me, you ain't even got a minute to go!"

Dogface and Abe hobbled through the brush, stumbling and crashing toward the railroad tracks. The sound of the train's whistle grew louder. Unfortunately, the sound of bloodhounds on their trail grew louder, too.

They caught them at the railroad siding.

"Unchain 'em!" the overseer barked. He fixed his flinty, red-rimmed eyes on

Dogface. "You done tried your last escape," he snarled. "Get him!" The posse tightened the circle around Dogface and started to club and kick him without mercy.

Abe was carried back to jail and got five years added to his time. A flood came through in the second year of his new sentence. He was piling sandbags onto the levee when a branch rose out of the churning, foaming chocolate muck and swept him and a deputy into the raging water. The swollen river dumped Abe 15 miles downstream, half-drowned, and the deputy 30 miles downstream, dead. Abe was sentenced to life imprisonment on suspicion of murder.

Four years later, he was killed by an avalanche in a quarry, where he and some other colored prisoners had been hired out. A bad blast started the landslide. Abe heard the ominous rumble. He looked up. The mountain was crumbling . . . rocks and boulders hurtling straight toward him. He started to run. THUNK—the ball and chain slipped from his sweaty hands. WHAP, THUD, SPLAT—the rocks arrived and all went black.

As soon as Abe breathed his last breath, he was whisked before the heavenly tribunal.

Released from the pressure of all the tons of stone that a minute ago had pressed so fatally on his chest, Abe let out a sigh of profound relief.

"Whew! . . . Jesus Christ," he said.

"Yes," a voice answered.

Abe looked up. When he saw he was in the presence of white people, he snatched off the ragged secondhand cap he had been given by the boss of the quarry. He gazed around in wonderment—radiant light, clouds, angels, celestial mist and, behind him, the line of newly dead growing and growing.

He was standing before what looked like an office desk. The desk was floating serenely on a cloud and behind the desk sat a thin, liberal-looking white man dressed in a flowing white robe and sporting a brown beard that ended in two points. On each side of the desk, a door floated. One was white and one was red, and before each door a flunky hovered. The white door had a pink cherub carrying a harp, and the red door had a bright-red guy with horns and a heavy-looking tail that he held in one hand and patted in the palm of the other, sort of like a cop with a night stick. Abe began to guess what all this meant.

The thin man behind the desk finished with the soul in front of Abe and beckoned. Abe shuffled forward. "Mr. Christ, sir?"

"Obviously, you've had religious training, since you seem to know my name," the Son of God said coldly.

At the sound of the chill in Jesus' voice, the imp by the door to hell smiled, revealing his pointed teeth, and the

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cherub at the door to heaven smirked in spite of himself and had to struggle to get a compassionate expression back on his face.

"Hunh?" Abe was stupefied. "Hunh? Me, suh?"

"George Abraham Carver, how do you plead—guilty or not guilty? And remember, lying won't help you."

At the familiar words, Abe snapped to his senses.

"I ain't guilty of nothing, sir. Nothing, that is, except being colored."

"George Abraham Carver, you are a habitual criminal," Jesus intoned in his heavenly voice, barely waiting for Abe to finish. "Do not waste the time of this court, this heavenly tribunal, with excuses. I am not current with the laws of your country, but I know a ball and chain when I see one. . . . If any man spends almost half his life behind bars, something must be radically wrong!"

"Yassuh, something sure is wrong, sir: I was just danc—"

"Silence!" the Son of God commanded, raising a majestic hand.

Immediately, Abe, who knew that tone all too well, dropped his head submissively and began to shuffle his feet. Jesus, who was not used to the sly defense mechanisms of oppressed people of color, was genuinely touched to the bottom of his charitable heart. Maybe I have made a mistake, he thought to himself. Maybe he is not a bad sort. "To err is human, to forgive, divine." I could give him executive clemency. Jesus hesitated. First I must be sure.

Just then, as God would have it, a white lady angel from Mississippi went gliding by.

"Sister lady angel, come here, if you would be so kind. I would like to question you," Jesus called sweetly.

"Yes, Jesus Christ, Son of Gawd," the lady angel drawled just as sweetly. "I suppose I was a little off limits, but I was just trying out my wings and—"

"No, no, that's not what I wish to speak to you about," Jesus gently assured her. "I just want you to answer some questions about this man . . . his people. . . ." Jesus gestured toward Abe standing before the desk.

The lady angel raised her eyes and looked in the direction Jesus indicated, and she noticed Abe for the first time.

The lady angel stood next to Jesus behind the desk, about ten feet from Abe. She had passed into the great beyond on her 73rd birthday, when a coughing fit, brought on by choking on a piece of egg-shell accidentally embedded in her birthday cake, strangled her to death. The lady was very ugly at the time of her death and still a virgin. In fact, she had always been so ugly that she'd never once been called on to defend that maiden-

head that, it is said, God loves so dearly. Anyway, a virgin is a virgin, and in heaven, as most places, results and not the why and wherefore are the scales by which judgment is made.

Abe, on the other hand, was called to his Maker in the prime of life. The years of hard labor had not yet taken a heavy toll, and there he stood, raggedly, tall, broad-shouldered, muscular and black. Of course, the results of the lady angel from Mississippi's seeing Abe would be perfectly predictable to anyone knowing anything about the reaction of white American women to black men, at least when white men are in the neighborhood. However, Jesus, as he himself admitted, was not up on his colored current events; and, to make the matter worse, angel costumes are made of thin, pure, heavenly cloth. In fact, they are so sheer that some of the more modest lady angels blush for centuries whenever someone looks at them.

"Help, Jesus Christ!" the lady angel screamed, jumping back another five feet from Abe. Her eyes rolled back into her head, her mouth went slack and slobbery. Before she swooned, she covered her breast with one hand and her holy crescent with the other. The guide to hell dropped his tail and sprang at Abe, grabbing his arm. When the smoke cleared, the lady angel had done the whole number and fainted. Jesus Christ rose from his seat, red in the face and bloated with fury. He pronounced sentence with Biblical wrath.

"Take him!" he ordered.

Abe was shoved through the red door. He marched down the corridor, head bent and shoulders hunched. Up ahead, a red-dish glow danced. The guide gave him that inevitable whack across the head with his night-stick tail and the tunnel ended abruptly at the edge of a huge pit. Far below, a fire of brimstone raged and people scurried around, stoking thousands of red-hot blast furnaces.

"Get a closer look," the guide said, and booted Abe in the behind and sent him jetting over the edge. Abe fell and fell and landed with a thud in the main area—a mammoth granite pit. A fiendish dancing glow came from an endless circle of raging furnaces. Before each furnace, the condemned sweated, throwing endless shovels of fuel from eternal mounds of coal into the searing flames.

"Well, if it ain't the slowest boy on the Georgia chain gang!"

Abe whirled around. There was Dogface, stripped to the waist and dripping with sweat, shoveling coal into a furnace.

Abe remembered the curses Dogface had laid on him when the hounds had cornered them at the railroad siding. "I'm sorry. I hope you ain't still mad. I sho wasn't used to running with no ball and chain."

"Man, man! That was the greatest thing that ever happened to me." Dogface leaned on his shovel and grinned.

"Course I ain't mad."

"I never heard no mo' about you after they unchained us and closed in on you. They sho was kicking you something awful."

"They sho did kick. It was the third time I tried to escape." Dogface chuckled.

"I been here ever since."

Abe was getting confused. "Ain't this here hell?"

"It is. And it ain't. It's what they call relative." He pointed to another furnace. "Now, you go over and work with that fellow. Don't take no stuff, 'cause remember, you're boss. At break time I'll explain everything to you."

"Break time?" Abe said in astonishment. "Nigger, is you crazy—"

"We don't use that word down here." Dogface cut in. "It ain't allowed. Now, get your ass over there. I'm boss of this section."

The man Abe was to work with was dressed in a deep-sea-diving outfit, but Abe could see his face through the plate-glass window. He was white. Abe snatched off his hat, bent his head and started the shuffling routine. To his astonishment, the white man took off his helmet, started to shuffle and called Abe sir. Abe had hardly ever had a white man call him by his right name, let alone sir.

When the whistle blew for the break, Dogface walked up and said, "Come on, let's get something to eat."

"I'm sho for that," Abe said as he followed through an arch in the rock into an enormous dining area. "Where is the colored section?" He looked around at a typical prison mess hall with rows of long wooden tables and benches. The difference was that, instead of sadistic guards in blue, there were sadistic imps in red, twirling their tails or brandishing pitchforks.

"We sit anywhere we please. There ain't no discrimination in hell." Dogface squeezed between two white men, who scowled at him. Abe was ready to leave. Dogface grabbed him by the belt and pulled him down to the bench. "Where you going?"

"I knew we gonna get in trouble. Can't you see them white men glaring?"

"I ain't blind. Of course these crackers don't like it. That's why it's hell for them, ha-ha-ha!"

"I is all confused. I'm just a poor, uneducated country nig—"

"Don't use that word!" Dogface interrupted.

Dinner was set before them in wooden bowls and Abe screamed with joy. "Chitterlin's! Lord, Lord, happy day! I ain't had no chitterlin's since I was a little boy."

Abe and Dogface dug into their bowls.

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elbows flying in a blur, but the enthusiasm was not unanimous. Some of the white men stared at the pig guts in disgust; some pecked bravely at them; a few managed to swallow a couple of bites. One man exploded and he stood up, screaming. *Zip!*—an imp speared him neatly and carried him out of the room, wriggling on a pitchfork.

When the two had finished, Dogface led the way toward a secluded spot behind a furnace. "Come on, I'll explain it all to you," he said.

They passed a torture nook full of hideous instruments and resounding with screams for mercy. One of the malcontents from the mess hall was being stretched on the rack and he was beginning to come apart from the seams. Abe averted his eyes from the nook, but he almost fainted at the next sight.

An almost endless file of naked women, most of them white, was passing in front of them. They were of every shape and size—and shovels were laid down at all the furnaces while men gave tantalized stares.

"I don't want to get in no trouble looking at white women," Abe mumbled, covering his eyes and turning his back.

"Man, turn around and stare for all you is worth, or you *will* get us in trouble," said Dogface. "You is supposed to be tempted!"

Abe gazed on the delicious sight. "Lordy, Lordy!"

Just then, a white man couldn't take the idea of black men's eyes staring at white women any longer and he started swinging at the first colored guy within reach. Theimps shrieked with joy, pulled them apart and began to beat the white man with their tails and to poke him with their forks.

When the file of women had finally passed, Abe and Dogface sat down. Tiny geysers of steam hissed from the cracks in the rocks around them.

"For one thing, everything is relative," Dogface pronounced. Abe's expression showed that he sure didn't understand. "What that means is that everything depends on something else. Now, listen, the Devil ain't nobody's fool. He knows well enough that there are a lot more white folks down here than colored—'cause, after all, hell is a part of the white folks' religion. We was just sort of adopted by it absent-mindedly. You get it now? Naw, naw, I see you don't."

"Well, I thought hell was a place where folks was unhappy. But I ain't never had it so good."

Dogface laughed. "Ain't you ever heard one man's meat is another man's poison? Since there's more white than colored here, the Devil decided to make the most amount of people miserable by the least amount of work. On earth, up North, I

hear they got a thing for colored folks called psychological torture. Well, the Devil does it just opposite. A white man has to be ten times better than a colored man to get a good job or a promotion."

"I want to know how come we get rest periods," Abe said. "I always figured we was supposed to work without stopping. Explain me that one."

"Optimism," Dogface said.

"Opti . . . opti . . . ? Man, you sure don't talk like you used to. I can't understand half them big words."

"I been going to school and getting educated," Dogface said proudly.

School? Abe's mouth flew open just as the whistle blew and the break was over.

Abe was shoveling coal in long, graceful arcs. All up and down the line of furnaces, the coal swooshed, *sszzh-thum*, *sszzh-thum*. A shovelful of coal was lighter than the sledge hammer Abe had used in the rock quarry. Everything was fine and Abe was enjoying his work. From a far corner of the pit came the screams of a few malcontents under torture.

Abe felt so good he began to sing *When the Saints Go Marching In*. His strong voice carried into every nook and cranny. It was the first time in the long history of hell that music had ever been heard. Then Abe began to get the feel of the song and his voice rose in volume as he swung into the next verse. Other black folks began to take up the song; their faces beamed and tears began to stream at the joy of the music.

The white people began to cry, too; but theirs were tears of sorrow, regret and despair. An inspector imp happened to be passing by and he looked at the misery meter. The despair needle had gone extraordinarily high. He made a note to bring this up at the next staff meeting and to suggest that spirituals be sung regularly.

The place was jumping. It wasn't the college-band-derby-hat version nor the society-matron-trying-to-imitate-her-maid version. It was the real thing, pure and basic, with voices rising and falling together in great gushes of melody and rhythm. The furnaces began to pulse and glow as a million shovelfuls of coal struck the fires simultaneously. The light in the pit rose and fell as if manipulated by some giant rheostat.

So much heat was generated that far off in the world, a mortal man discovered the key to atomic energy. He sat bolt upright in bed and grabbed for the pad on his night table.

The music rose to an unbelievable pitch, the pit was in a frenzy. A white guy who had belonged to a penitential sect grabbed a blowtorch away from an imp and tried to roast himself into heaven. Another imp grabbed some white

girls from the kitchen and ordered them to make love with the Negroes. The morale of the white folks plunged to the lowest depths in the history of hell and 17 race riots broke out. The fuckers and the fuckees were enjoying themselves so much that the authorities finally had to blow the whistle to stop the screwing—it blew five times before anyone heard it.

Dinner was pigtails, and two whites and a Negro who had passed for white in the other world complained about the menu and were hauled off to the torture chamber to have their complainers cut out.

Afterward, Dogface and Abe sat behind a furnace and talked. "You say you been getting eddicated?" asked Abe.

"Yeah, I been studying ever since I been here. When I came, I could just hardly sign my name—just enough to sign them I.O.U.s at the company store."

"How come they let you go to school, anyway? . . . I'm so dumb."

"Don't worry, you gonna understand it all right. I ain't as dumb as I thought and you ain't, either. In fact, you know most of the important answers already; you just don't know you know 'em."

"Lordy, Dogface, it sure does my heart good to hear a colored man talk like that. Could I go to school if I really begged?"

"They'll beg you, Abe. The Devil believes that the more a man knows about the way the world is, the more he can suffer."

Abe chuckled. "Dogface, you sure is an old rascal." He slapped Dogface on the knee. "I get it—you been getting eddicated and fooling the Devil!"

"I ain't been fooling him." Dogface hung his head dejectedly. "He is right."

"Tell me," said Abe, "is us colored folks really dumber than white folks?"

"Naw, they aren't no smarter. They just got what's called psychological warfare. But, Abe, take my advice. When they ask you to go to school, say no."

In the middle of the shift, an imp came by with some application forms and asked Abe if he'd like to sign up for school.

"Yessir, I sure do," he said, throwing caution to the wind.

The imp asked what course he'd like to take, but Abe said, seeing that he could barely write his name, he didn't know. The imp was overjoyed at that and he thought of hell's marvelous college curriculum—all the courses that laid out man's inhumanity to man, the centuries of *Homo sapiens'* lying, cheating, greed, perversion and cruelty. Hell studies specialized in the undiluted truth—and here was a virgin mind ready for it all!

"Me, too, sir. I'd like to go to school."

The imp whirled around. The voice belonged to a white guy in a buckskin suit. He was about 24 or so, Abe's age, but he looked older because he hadn't any hair, only a bloody expanse of skull where he'd been scalped.

The smile vanished from the imp's

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face. "You got a quota slip?" he snarled. "Yes, sir." The imp grabbed the slip and, when he saw that it was in order, he nodded grudgingly.

At the next break, when Abe told Dogface that he'd enrolled, Dogface only shrugged. "You're an optimist, Abe. That's somebody who thinks things are going to turn out all right. The Boss Man—God, that is—is an optimist, too. He thought people was going to get better and better as time went along, and so He built heaven real big and He made hell a lot smaller. He sure was wrong when He thought badness in folks would wither away, wasn't He?" Dogface was tickled and he laughed so that the tears ran down his cheeks. "Hell used to be really hell, but now, because of the overcrowding, it ain't so bad anymore."

"How do you know? Maybe it was always this way," said Abe.

"Well, you're learning," said Dogface. "You're beginning to question things—but, no, it used to be a lot worse. I read about it in a book by some Italian fella who got permission to take a trip down here. He said hell was laid out in circles, like an upside-down layer cake. In those days, theimps had time to get around to everybody—burning and pulling, tantalizing and freezing. It made folks mighty unhappy."

"Was they unhappier than they was when the imp passed the white girls out to the colored men just a couple of shifts ago?"

"There's a difference," Dogface said. "Burning and beating is what they call physical torture. Giving us equal rights and integrating is what they call psychological torture. You can psychologically torture a peckerwood by telling him about Negroes going to school. Or about a white woman carrying a tan baby around in her stomach."

"Many a black woman has carried a tan baby around in her stomach," Abe said.

"Amen. Don't I know. How many coal-black people you know? And how many in different shades of brown? The white man thinks it's his right to put his foot on a colored man's head and his thing in a colored woman. Just getting down to real-life cases for a minute—I told the boss's son I didn't think he should always be coming down to my cabin and bothering my wife while I was working in the sawmill from sunup to sundown. Next thing I knew, I was put on the chain gang for stealing. I ain't stolen anything in my life." Dogface began to cry softly, overcome by his own story.

"Man, I didn't always look this way. I weren't never anything special to look at, but I could walk down the street without being stared at. My name was Booker and they called me Bookie.

"Anyway, I'd been on the gang for almost a year when one day my wife came

to visit me—for the first time. She had our three children with her and a new baby. It was hers, but it wasn't mine—hers and a white man's. I kissed all the children, starting with Samuel, the oldest. He was a sweet, strong little fellow who always helped his mommy, just like a man. Then there were the two girls. Finally, I looked at the new baby. He was a pretty little fellow and he looked like my wife, only lighter. She held the little thing up to me, but I wasn't going to kiss it.

"Then I thought about my wife and I knew she wasn't a bad woman. She was just trying to protect our children and keep food in their mouths the best way she could. And that baby was a human being, just a tiny thing needing love. Well, I kissed it and it seemed to smile. I know it was too young to smile, but it seemed to, anyhow. If I ever get to see an angel smile, Abe, I think it will look like that baby."

The whistle blew then and the break was over. A couple ofimps with glowing torches came and formed up a group, including Abe and Dogface, and marched them off. "We're going to school now," Dogface explained.

After a little while, the trail widened and they went through an entrance into a huge room where their footsteps echoed on a marble floor. All at once, there was the shattering blast of a horn. It blew three times and its mighty notes carried throughout the underworld.

"That's the disaster horn," Dogface said. "But all the time I been here, I only heard it give a few squeaks, never a full fart. Something mighty big must be up."

Suddenly, a gargantuan Roman candle went up, chasing the shadows and illuminating the room even up to the distant ceiling arches. Abe got his first good look at his comrades.

Everyone still wore what he had had on at the moment of death. There was the scalped man in the buckskin suit who had signed up for school when Abe had. There were soldiers in every kind of military uniform. One man had a noose around his neck. There were people in nightgowns and pajamas. A man dressed in a polo outfit must have died in the saddle. Other men, wearing nothing but undershirts and socks, must have died in the saddle, too—they had gaping wounds in their backs and one still had a huge butcher knife wedged between his shoulder blades.

The Devil, alone in his oak-paneled conference room, was dancing a jig, chanting, "War, war, war!" His secretary was phoning all members of the general staff and asking them to attend a meeting.

When they were all assembled around the table, one executive ventured to say, "But it's only an Austrian archduke who's been assassinated. We can't—"

"Rest assured, gentlemen, the curtain

has risen on World War One!" said the Devil in his evil voice, banging his fist on the table. It did not sound like an ordinary blow: It had the sound of a wounded soldier's cry as he lay in no man's land, the sound of a young girl's sob as she was captured, or an animal as it was blown half apart, or a baby skewered on a bayonet. The Devil leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and imagined the lovely carnage.

Before long, so many new men began to pour into hell to stoke the furnaces that students were given extra time for their studies. Abe and the scalped man were the only two in their group who couldn't read, and so they were given a tutor. One day, after the professor had gone, the other man asked Abe, "How come a slave like you wants to learn to read?"

"I never was nobody's slave," Abe said indignantly. "Even if some of you folks tried to treat me like one."

"How come you speak American, then?"

"I am an American," Abe said.

"How come you're black and American and not a slave? Did your master free you?" the man asked.

"I never had a master," Abe said proudly. "Colored people ain't slaves no more, at least legalwise."

"I been down here a long time," the man said half to Abe and half to himself. "A long time, I reckon." Then he fell silent, sitting with his chin cupped in his hands. He was a long, lean fellow with a grave face.

He held out his hand. At first, Abe was confused, because he'd never shaken hands with a white man before; then, gingerly, he took the hand. The man smiled and Abe found himself smiling, too. Their grip tightened in friendship.

"My name is Dave Stock. I used to be a scout for settlers heading west to Illinois."

"I'm George Abraham Carver," Abe said. He couldn't think of any nice way to describe his life, so he added simply, "I lived in the South."

They were silent for a moment, and then Dave said, "I'm glad they freed the slaves. I never liked the idea of slavery in a democracy. A black man is as good as a white man; isn't that right, George?"

Abe wondered if the man were trying to trap him somehow. Finally, he said, "Yes, Mr. Stock, a black man is just as good as a white man." The phrases felt so good in Abe's mouth that he repeated them.

"All men are created equal and endowed by the Creator with certain rights—that's in the Declaration," Dave said.

After a short while, Abe and Dave became good friends and, toward the end of the reading-and-writing class, Dave suggested that they sign up for a course in

American history. "I've got a lot of catching up to do," he said.

"I think I'll study that, too," Abe said.

One day, Abe went in search of Dogface and found him reading a thick treatise on economics. Dogface was sitting in an alcove and he pretended not to see Abe at first.

"Booker, man, you sure are studying."

"My name is Dogface. How come you aren't with your white friend? I thought you were getting to be a real white man's nigger."

"Dogface, that word—" An imp had appeared and was cying them suspiciously. "I just wanted to talk with you a little the way we used to. But you've got it all wrong about Dave—he was born just about when the country was started and he was killed before they began to call colored people stupid apes. He's a real American in the true sense of the word."

"I haven't met a good white person in the true sense of the word yet," Dogface's anger started melting away. "Well, anyway, I can see you've been making progress with your vocabulary."

"I can read and write now and when we've finished this course, Dave and I are going to study all about America. Listen, you've got him all wrong. He's got a good heart, I'm sure of it. He was born before all this prejudice got started."

"Man, you sure talk stupid," said Dogface. "Don't go losing your common sense. Let me tell you, it wasn't that cracker deputy sheriff who kicked me to death; it was his great-great-grandpappy, that's who—one of them founding fathers. Did George Washington and Thomas Jefferson have slaves or not?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a chance to study that yet."

"Well, you better get to reading." The bond between them seemed to have been broken and Abe walked off.

The war was going even worse than the Devil had dared hope. Each nation, planning a quick, glorious triumph, jumped into the fray. The Germans' right wing attacked through Belgium; the French counterattacked; the Russians invaded East Prussia. The English charged machine guns with cavalry and things got bloodier. The Devil sent a courier to God the Father to ask for more space.

"Man will learn his lesson. This will be a war to end all wars," said God the Father in His heavenly voice. He spread His hands benignly before Him in the position that He had made famous. "I can see the future before Me. Man will come to his true state of goodness. Tell your master, Lucifer, that I would give him the space were it not unfair to the thousands of souls who will come to My gates in the future."

"You could create a new universe," suggested the courier.

"What for?" asked God the Father, getting a bit red in the face. "This one is perfectly all right!"

"Daddy, I've been looking all over for You. It's time for Your nap," said Jesus Christ, floating up on a cloud car.

"Did you hear what he said?" God the Father, who is easily excitable, was shaking with wrath. "New universe, indeed. Why, I made this one Myself."

"There, there; don't get upset. It's just one of Satan's stupid tricks," Jesus soothed.

He turned to the courier. "You can tell your master that we need all the space we have for the glorious era of love and understanding to come. Why, didn't I myself go down and die on the cross to save mankind's collective soul?" As he spoke, he extended his arms and displayed his feet to show off the nail marks. "Wasn't I crucified on Calvary for—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the courier, who had heard the story many times before, "but we are terribly overcrowded and understaffed."

"On the third day, I arose . . ." Jesus went on, not to be interrupted.

"New universe, indeed!" God the Father mumbled to Himself as He and Jesus floated off.

When the courier reported the results, the Devil said, "Well, I figured as much, but it never hurts to try. Let's call another meeting of the general staff."

Trench warfare had developed into a science; planes now fought each other in the air or dropped bombs; poison gas was in vogue; reinforcements poured into a hundred battle fronts.

"Gentlemen, our request for more space has been denied," said the Devil. "Therefore, if we can't expand outwardly, we must expand inwardly." He paused for effect and looked around the table. "We shall modernize."

There was a babble of voices and the Devil had to hold up his hand for silence. "Do you realize that half our space is taken up by torture equipment? For instance, a rack to stretch a man is as big as a boxcar. We have been specialists, fitting the torture to the individual case—blinding painters, starving gluttons, making lovers impotent. Very effective. But this is no longer the age of specialization; it is the age of mass production. We must mass-produce misery!"

The Devil warmed to his subject. "I foresaw this crisis long ago and, for over two hundred years, I've been experimenting with a new system. And it works, gentlemen; it is an outstanding success. I call it the American system, because the subjects all come from that nation. I ordered pit thirty exclusively devoted to Americans."

"With them, we didn't go in for individual torture. We wanted to find the common denominators of fear and horror in the whole society—and, with these

tools, we could torture a very large number at one time. We learned that Americans, as a society, love money. They hate laziness. They are ashamed of sex. But their weakest point by far is their attitude toward the blacks in their midst. In 'the land of equality,' those blacks are second-class citizens. By reversing this 'equality' in favor of the blacks, we caused all the white Americans torture beyond imagination!"

The Devil, very pleased with himself, pulled a memo pad from his pocket and glanced at it. "Facts and figures, gentlemen. The misery graphs from the different pits show similar patterns, but"—he allowed himself a small smile—"the American pit is run with one fifth the number ofimps, and one eighth the amount of space. An efficiency breakthrough, gentlemen."

After the thunderous round of applause, the director of protocol, a gadfly and a quibbler, had a question. "A small point, sir, but if the purpose of hell is to punish all sinners, doesn't the granting of equality to black sinners in fact give them a certain measure of—and I hesitate to use the word—contentment?"

"That's a purist point of view. My answer is that any little contentment they may have is offset by the vast unhappiness of their countrymen. In fact, any small comfort the blacks have directly adds to the misery of the others. Nothing, of course, is perfect."

Then the Devil turned slightly in his chair and pointed to a large graph on the wall behind him. His voice grew hearty as he said, "You all know that this shows the highest recording of the misery meter in history, 90.05. But wait, gentlemen; look at this." He drew another graph from his portfolio and passed it down the table. "A Negro sang in pit thirty. Look at that—a new record in misery: 90.09!" They all beamed. "Gentlemen, I'll show you how to modernize hell!"

Oblivious to the passage of time or to almost anything else, Dogface, Abe and Dave toiled away at their studies. Dogface was close to getting his Ph.D. in economics and the two others were doing college-level work in American history.

Abe often had reason to remember Dogface's words, "The more you know, the more you suffer." Abe was suffering. Precisely, Abe was in love. He was in love with the ideals always preached as the fundamental structure of America. Naturally, when he began going a little deeper into matters and learning how those ideals had been abused, he suffered. As he studied the history of the U.S.A., Abe experienced the misery of a young man who begins to suspect that the girl of his dreams is a hooker. Abe had ups and downs: John Paul Jones, the westward movement, the Alamo, discovery of gold in California, carpathaggers, the K.K.K., capitalism, "Remember the Maine," Over

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There—and his heart ran a gamut of emotions as he read of the disasters, the triumphs and the promise. Always there, the promise. Perhaps she isn't a whore, after all. Or, if she is, perhaps she can change.

Dave loved America and he was proud of her, too: the first colonists, the advancing frontier, the growth of business, the discovery of oil, the spanking of naughty nations. Dave always rose from his studies with a glow of pride. America was always up and doing, all right.

"Do you know what I'd like to do more than anything? I'd like to go back to the world," Abe confessed one day. "I've learned so much; I've got so much to say."

"I know what you mean," Dave said. "America's success—Abe, I want to be part of it! The sweep, the power!"

They became so obsessed with the idea that they talked of nothing else. They were like two small boys on a summer afternoon, trying to soar on the wings of fantasy. They had to escape.

After enormous difficulties, heartbreak, tangles of red tape and many mistakes, the modernization of hell was almost complete. Once, for instance, because of a clerical error, everyone in the French pit had been issued two liters of wine per shift. By the time the mistake had been discovered, the misery meter had registered absolute contentment 68 times.

The Devil added other last-minute touches of diabolic genius. In the Italian pit, henceforth, no one would be allowed to gesture or to speak above a whisper. Everyone in the English pit would have to have sexual intercourse at least five times on each shift. Every Frenchman would be forced to hold the same opinion on every subject. Each person in the Dutch pit would be forced to have a different opinion on every subject.

The Devil decided that it was appropriate to have an inauguration ceremony in his conference room and his adjoining private quarters. "I'll have an extension wire run from the misery meter in each pit right into the conference room," he thought. "When I cut the tape and press the button, we can sit back, watch the dials and enjoy the results. But first we'll have a little bacchanal." He called for his secretary.

"Plenty of food and drink—and you might check to see if anyone has come up with something new in narcotics. Be sure to see that there are plenty of girls invited from the offices and see that they act right this time, understand?"

"I don't quite, sir," said the secretary, lowering her head.

"Just as I thought," said the Devil. "Well, I don't want the girls coming in buck naked at the beginning. Let the imagination secrete a bit first. Remember Salome's seven veils? Let's have about four on each girl. No perfume—and have

them work up a good sweat before they come in. Nothing sexier than that. And don't forget a virgin for the head of the Ways and Means Committee."

"We don't have any more," said the secretary. "The only one left in the filing room got deflowered last orgy."

"What the heaven!" stormed the Devil. "Must I think of everything? Just get some girl he hasn't seen before, make a maidenhead for her and tell her not to act too eager. He'll never know the difference. And don't forget an office boy for the director of protocol."

The secretary had squirmed around in her chair until she had managed to work her skirt halfway up her thighs and she kept crossing and uncrossing her legs.

"Put yourself down on the list, too," the Devil said, taking a good peep.

"Thank you, sir," she said softly.

"Hey!"—pop, pop, pop, he snapped his fingers—"find the man who sang that song in pit thirty and send him up here."

"Yes, sir." The secretary searched the files. "His name is George Abraham Carver."

Down in pit 30, it was break time and Dogface was needling Abe and Dave and telling them they'd better hurry up because time was running out and it wouldn't be long now.

"What won't be long?" Abe asked.

"Capitalism. Ever since the war started, it's been sliding toward its doom. The proletariat has risen in Russia and soon communism will spread all over the world. History is on our side—"

"I know one thing," Dave broke in. "Democracy isn't doomed so long as mankind is free."

"Free!" said Dogface. "Free for the poor to get booted in the ass by the rich!"

They were still going at it hot and heavy when an imp appeared alongside their furnace. "George Abraham Carver, follow me," he said politely. Abe was so surprised that he could only nod yes.

He was shown into the Devil's office, where the Devil himself sat behind a huge desk in a wing chair with the back turned toward Abe. "Lord, Lord," Abe thought, "this is the finest room I ever have seen." The Devil turned his chair around. Everything was either jet-black or garish red. The desk, the door-knob and the Devil's double-breasted suit were black. The rug, the walls, the ceiling, the telephone and the Devil's tie, handkerchief and buttons were red.

Outside of the fact that his skin was red and he had two knobs on his head, the Devil looked pretty human. He watched Abe through narrowed eyes. "So you're a singer?" he asked cordially.

Abe stood before the desk, his clothing faded beyond recognition, his head bowed, the old secondhand cap clutched in one hand and the ball and chain dangling from the other. "No, sir, Mr. Devil.

I shovel coal four shifts and I go to school the fifth."

"But you are the George Abraham Carver who started the singing, caused the riot and set a record on the misery meter, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Abe apologized. "I just started and all the other colored folks joined in. The riot wasn't my fault—that happened because one of the imps brought out the white girls. I hope it doesn't hurt my chances any."

"Your chances for what?" the Devil asked.

"Well, what I've been asking to see you about. It's a kind of long story, Mr. Devil—"

"I didn't know you were asking to see me, but if it's a long story, we'll come back to it later," he said, cutting Abe off. "But now, Abe, I've got good news for you. I'm going to let you sing again. I guess that makes you pretty happy, doesn't it?"

"No, sir, I don't feel like singing anymore. You see, what I wanted to ask you about is this—"

"Not now, Abe. Suppose I told you that if you sang a nice, touching song, it would make me very, very happy? And suppose I told you if you didn't sing, you would be tortured horribly?"

"I'd sure try to sing," said Abe, "even if I was so scared my throat was all dried up."

"What would you say if I told you I'd give you a wonderful reward, something you've always wanted to try—a white girl to have intercourse with?"

"I already done that twice, Mr. Devil," said Abe. "Once with one of the girls who used to wait behind the bushes at the colored dance and once down here."

"Well, what do you want?" the Devil asked in desperation.

"Well, sir, it's that long story I wanted to see you about—"

"Make it a short story," said the Devil impatiently.

"I want to go back to earth, Mr. Devil."

"OK," the Devil agreed immediately.

"My friend Dave wants to go back, too, sir." The Devil agreed. "Thank you very much. You know how I feel now, Mr. Devil, sir? I feel like singing!"

Everything was ready in all the pits and an imp with a walkie-talkie as big as a telephone pole stood by Abe and Dave for the countdown. "I'll get the go-ahead and you'll start at my signal," he said. "What are you going to sing?"

"*This Little Light of Mine*," said Abe.

In the Devil's private quarters, dinner had just been finished and the staff lay on chaise longues, too bloated to move. "Kindly look toward the ceiling, gentlemen," the Devil said, pressing a button that caused a glass platform to descend until it almost touched their noses. A musky odor permeated the air as 22 women, a synthetic virgin and a young

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man danced into the room, each wearing four veils.

The dancing on the glass platform grew wilder and wilder. The legs leaped, sprawled, spraddled, split, spun. Occasionally, an executive would lose his sense and bump his nose hard against the glass. Finally, when the dancing had reached fever pitch, the Devil gave a signal and the dancers sprang from the platform into the arms of the waiting executives. A shout went up, pants dropped, veils were ripped off. The Devil, reclining majestically on his chaise longue with his nude secretary crouched down next to his private parts, surveyed the scene.

"Swear to me you're both a virgin and a whore," the head of the Ways and Means Committee said to his date.

"My, but you've got smooth skin," the director of protocol said to the office boy.

At last, the Devil pulled his private parts out of the secretary's grasp and stood up, announcing, "Gentlemen, it is time for the ceremony in the conference room." A reluctant groan arose from the orgygoers. "But bring your dates with you." A cheer of approval went up from the staff.

Once there, the Devil picked up a huge pair of shears and cut the ceremonial sash that had been draped across the row of misery meters. There was a burst of applause. He pressed a button and announced, "Gentlemen, the modern era of hell has begun!"

Down in the pit, the imp got the words on his walkie-talkie and signaled to Abe. Abe took a deep breath and, keeping time as he scooped the coal, began to sing:

*"This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine—hump.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine—humph."*

Abe's voice seemed to fill the place. As he started in on the verse again, black voices from all parts of pit 30 sang in harmony with him.

" 'This little light of mine—' "

"Sing it, Brother Abel!" Dogface shouted.

" 'I'm gonna let it shine—humph.' "

Every Negro in the pit was singing, keeping time to the music by beating shovels or banging pans or stomping feet or just by clapping their hands. The white people began to moan in despair.

The hand on pit 30's misery meter began to climb.

" 'Shall I hide it under a bushel?' " Abe sang.

"No!" the Negroes shouted.

" 'I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine. . . ' "

The music flowed through the pit as if it came from the river of heaven itself and the sinners cried in longing for the ever-loving waters of paradise—a sip lost forever, a thirst never to be gratified. The



"But Dr. Dolittle, I thought you only talked to the animals."

despair kept climbing. Hardened whores thought of their first loves. Gamblers remembered their mothers—or that first lucky game. Winos remembered their last drink.

In the conference room, everyone stared in fascination as the misery meter rose toward the old record.

Back in pit 30, the manager ordered his foreman, "Now, have the night squad pass the white women out to the black men." Pandemonium broke loose in the pit.

The misery meter jumped to a new record. The Devil graciously acknowledged the wave of applause and cheers. "And now let us adjourn to my private quarters to continue the celebration," he said.

Abe shook hands with Dogface and said goodbye. Then he and Dave set off to see the Devil. When Abe opened the door, the room was so full of oparjuana smoke—the Devil's private blend of opium and marijuana—that he was almost blinded. He gently shook one arm and a secretary giggled. He tried another and the office boy giggled.

At last he found the Devil, who, with some difficulty, was assisted into his office by one of the servants.

"I hope you liked my singing, sir," said Abe. The Devil was nude except for one red garter. "We are all ready, sir, Mr. Devil."

"Ready for what?"

"To go back to earth, sir," Abe said.

"Yes, I almost forgot." Actually, the Devil had never intended to keep his promise, but the oparjuana had wiped out his memory of that. "It's now 1938," he said. "At the stroke of midnight, Eastern standard time, you will each return to the spot where you died. But first, just for the files, I must know why you want to go back."

"I want to be a part of America, a part of progress," Dave said.

"I've learned so much," Abe said. "If I could only have the chance to make it clear to them that there is so much promise, so much possibility in our country."

"I must be getting intoxicated from the oparjuana," thought the Devil.

"Anyway," he said, "come and stand on this magic spot in front of my desk. Oh, I almost forgot—you each get a going-away present. Well, what would you like?"

"My scalp," said Dave.

"A file," said Abe, holding up his ball and chain.

"Done!" said the Devil, and he clapped his hands and Abe and Dave disappeared.

"Bon voyage!" the Devil shouted to the empty room. Then, for some reason, the whole thing struck him as very funny and he laughed his cruel, diabolic laugh and went back to the orgy.

